



INTERROGATING MALE PRIVILEGE IN INDIAN POPULAR CINEMA: A FEMINIST SOCIOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

R. Kumaran ¹  & Roopa Hari ²

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details: ¹Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Gandhigram Rural Institute, Deemed to be University, Gandhigram, Tamil Nadu, India; ² Guest Faculty at the Department of Sociology, The Gandhigram Rural Institute, Deemed to be University, Gandhigram, Tamil Nadu, India

Corresponding Author:

R. Kumaran

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Abstract

Indian popular cinema plays a central role in shaping and reflecting societal values, often embedding and normalising patriarchal structures. This article critically examines the portrayal of male privilege in selected Indian films through a feminist and sociological lens. The study uses qualitative semiotic and intersectional analyses to explore how film visual and narrative devices sustain, naturalise, or challenge hegemonic masculinity. The article analyses films such as Thappad, The Great Indian Kitchen, Pink, and others to interrogate the cinematic construction of gender hierarchies, with particular attention to family, motherhood, occupation, and public/private divides.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Male Privilege, Gender Representation, Hegemonic Masculinity, Intersectionality, Cultural Semantics, Emotional Labour, Agency and Resistance

1. Introduction: Popular Cinema as a Patriarchal Mirror

Cinema in India is not merely a medium of storytelling or entertainment – it functions as a potent cultural institution that shapes and mirrors societal values, norms, and power relations. Among the most persistent and insidious structures embedded in Indian cinema is patriarchy, a system that privileges male dominance in social, political, economic, and interpersonal domains. Films, particularly those within the mainstream, often serve to legitimise and normalise these gendered hierarchies by constructing masculinity as rational, authoritative, and dominant, while femininity is frequently depicted as emotional, sacrificial, and subservient (Chakravarty, 1993; Uberoi, 1998).

The cinematic portrayal of male privilege is not accidental but embedded in the narrative logic, camera work, dialogues, and character arcs. As Laura Mulvey (1975) famously argued, mainstream cinema is structured around the “male gaze,” where the camera aligns the audience’s perspective with that of a presumed heterosexual male viewer. This results in the objectification of women and the reinforcement of male centrality. Moreover, Indian films routinely depict male characters exercising control over women’s lives, making key decisions within the household, and dominating in professional spheres, thus reinforcing patriarchal social arrangements as natural and desirable.

However, cinema is also a contested terrain. In recent years, several films have begun to challenge these norms by centering women’s voices, showcasing gender-based violence, and problematising the invisibilised structures of male privilege. These films do not merely reflect change but actively contribute to the cultural dialogue around gender justice. Through narrative disruption and visual resistance, they hold a mirror to the society from which they emerge, questioning the status quo and offering alternative visions of gender relations. The present study aims to interrogate these cinematic portrayals, specifically focusing on how male privilege is constructed, challenged, and negotiated within popular Indian films.

2. Theoretical Framework: Gender, Patriarchy, and Representation

The theoretical framework for understanding male privilege in cinema integrates three key perspectives: feminist film theory, gender role conflict theory, and intersectional analysis.

Together, these provide a robust analytical lens through which the sociocultural dynamics of gender representation in cinema can be critically examined.

Feminist film theory, particularly the work of Laura Mulvey (1975), introduces the concept of the “male gaze,” wherein cinematic narratives and visual techniques prioritise a heterosexual male viewer. This framework elucidates how women are constructed as passive objects of male desire, their roles confined to reinforcing male protagonists’ journeys. Films, especially in classical and commercial Indian cinema, often reinforce heteronormative and patriarchal values by employing gendered tropes such as the sacrificial mother, the seductive vamp, or the idealised wife, limiting female agency and diversity of expression.

Gender role conflict theory (O’Neil, 2008) adds another dimension by illustrating how socially embedded masculine norms generate psychological tension in men, especially when their internal experiences conflict with expected behaviours. These tensions frequently surface in cinema through portrayals of male characters who resist vulnerability, assert dominance, or suppress emotion to conform to idealised masculine standards. The inability to express emotional complexity is portrayed as a strength in male characters, perpetuating stoicism as an essential trait of masculinity.

Intersectionality, as formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), addresses how identities such as caste, class, religion, sexuality, and age intersect with gender. This perspective is vital in analyzing Indian cinema, where representations of male privilege vary significantly based on sociocultural location. For instance, upper-caste male protagonists may assert dominance in different ways compared to working-class or minority characters, but all are generally afforded more autonomy and visibility than their female counterparts. By deploying intersectionality, this study captures the multiplicity of patriarchal structures and reveals how privilege operates across axes of identity, shaping characters’ roles and interactions.

Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight that male privilege in cinema is not monolithic but is mediated through cultural codes, institutional norms, and systemic inequalities. The integration of feminist theory, role conflict, and intersectionality allows for a more nuanced reading of how films simultaneously reflect and perpetuate gendered power relations.

3. Methodology: A Feminist Qualitative Inquiry

This study adopts a feminist qualitative methodology to explore the construction and contestation of male privilege in Indian popular films. The qualitative approach is grounded in interpretivist epistemology, which prioritizes understanding the meanings, symbols, and cultural practices embedded within social phenomena—in this case, cinematic texts. Rather than seeking universal generalizations, the study focuses on deep, contextualized interpretations of visual and narrative strategies.

The research is based on purposive sampling of seven contemporary Indian films: *Thappad*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Pink*, *The Teacher*, *Sara’s*, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, and *Mom*. These films were selected for their explicit engagement with themes of gender inequality, patriarchal norms, and women’s resistance. Each film was analyzed in detail to identify recurring motifs, symbolic representations, character arcs, and dialogic exchanges that signify male privilege.

Semiotic analysis was employed to decode visual symbols, mise-en-scène, editing styles, and sound design, all of which contribute to meaning-making in cinema. For instance, the repetitive sounds of kitchen chores in *The Great Indian Kitchen* or the strategic use of silence in *Thappad* serve as non-verbal commentaries on gendered labor and emotional violence, respectively. Intersectional analysis further enabled the examination of how caste, class, and familial structures intersect with gender roles, particularly in scenes involving domestic hierarchies or public reputations.

In addition, thematic coding was used to classify instances of male dominance, female agency, gendered speech acts, and spatial divisions. The films were reviewed multiple times to capture nuanced representations that may escape a single viewing. Dialogue, costume, camera angles, lighting, and background music were all analyzed as conveyors of meaning.

This multi-layered methodological framework offers a holistic view of how films function as both social texts and cultural products. By combining semiotic and intersectional methods, the study interrogates not only what is shown on screen but also what is implied, omitted, or contested – ultimately providing a comprehensive understanding of how male privilege is represented and disrupted in Indian popular cinema.

Absolutely! Below is an expanded and strengthened Analysis and Discussion section, adding depth, additional scholarly insight, and nuanced intersectional engagement, bringing it up by approximately 1000 words to suit the expectations of *Economic and Political Weekly*. This revised section now forms the core analytical contribution of the article.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Male Privilege in the Domestic Sphere: The “Sanctity” of the Home

The domestic sphere is often idealised in patriarchal societies as a site of care, tradition, and moral order. Still, feminist theory has long established it as a critical arena for exercising patriarchal power (Delphy & Leonard, 1992). In *Thappad* (2020), Amrita’s life as a devoted housewife initially appears harmonious until a moment of physical violence – her husband slapping her at a party – triggers an existential awakening. The slap is symbolic, not just in its physicality but in what it represents: the cumulative disregard for her individuality within the domestic space. Her reaction to this incident disrupts the common cultural logic that excuses such behaviour as minor or even acceptable, thereby undermining the notion that domestic violence is “private” and unworthy of public redress.

Notably, *Thappad* does not sensationalise the abuse but rather critiques its normalisation. The silence that follows the slap becomes a motif of systemic complicity, as other characters – including Amrita’s mother and mother-in-law – urge her to “move on.” This silence echoes Hanmer’s (1978) idea of “structural violence,” wherein systemic oppression is rendered invisible, especially within familial relationships.

Similarly, *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) engages with the home not as a sanctuary but as a site of invisible, unpaid labour. The relentless scenes of cooking, cleaning, and serving underscore the dehumanizing repetition of domesticity, where a woman’s worth is reduced to her capacity to sustain patriarchal continuity. By denying a musical score and emphasising the auditory textures of chopping, mopping, and frying, the film draws attention to the oppressive monotony of household work. Here, the kitchen is not merely a location but a metaphor for cultural incarceration.

Both films resist the typical Bollywood trope where women “adjust” to abusive marriages for the sake of family harmony. Instead, they centre women’s refusal – Amrita walks away from a socially respectable marriage; the unnamed bride in *GIRL* leaves behind tradition to reclaim her autonomy. These acts of dissent are politically potent, serving as counter-narratives to the dominant cultural valorisation of female sacrifice.

4.2 Occupation, Aspirations, and the Gendered Division of Labour

The issue of occupational inequality surfaces prominently in *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022) and *Sara’s* (2021). In *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, Jaya’s husband runs a poultry business, which is valorized within the family. Jaya is expected to accept a subordinate role, reinforcing the patriarchal perception that even within professional domains, men’s work is inherently more legitimate. However, after enduring repeated physical abuse, Jaya not only retaliates physically – a rare and radical act in Indian cinema – but also takes over the poultry business, demonstrating competence and innovation. Her success implicitly interrogates the gendered assumptions surrounding productivity and entrepreneurship.

In *Sara’s*, the protagonist’s desire to pursue filmmaking over motherhood directly challenges the entrenched cultural belief that womanhood is synonymous with maternity. Her insistence on reproductive choice foregrounds the critical feminist demand for bodily autonomy (Petchesky, 1984). Sara’s family, representing conventional Indian middle-class values, fails to understand her aspirations, equating motherhood with feminine fulfilment. By prioritizing her career, Sara offers an alternative model of womanhood that is not self-sacrificial but self-defining.

These films draw attention to women’s cultural barriers in accessing public roles, from workplace discrimination to moral policing. They also illustrate how male privilege operates not merely through denial of opportunity but via symbolic devaluation of women’s ambitions. These portrayals are particularly significant in an Indian context, where gendered occupational segregation remains deeply entrenched, and women’s labour force participation rates are among the lowest globally (World Bank, 2022).

4.3 Public Space, Surveillance, and Gendered Morality

The policing of women’s bodies and behaviour in public spaces is another recurring theme. *Pink* (2016) is arguably the most explicit in its critique. The film’s courtroom drama centres on three women who are harassed and assaulted by politically connected men after a party. The case becomes less about the assault and more about the women’s “morality” – their choice of dress, alcohol consumption, and presence in a man’s hotel room.

Drawing from Foucault’s (1977) concept of surveillance, *Pink* illustrates how women’s mobility is constantly scrutinized. The state, family, and society converge to impose “rules” of acceptable female behaviour. The courtroom becomes a site where patriarchal ideology attempts to reassert itself under the guise of legal objectivity. However, the film turns this logic on its head by declaring that “No means No,” regardless of the context – a radical assertion in a culture that often relativises consent.

The spatial dimension of patriarchy – where public spaces are masculinized and female presence is conditional – is reinforced in these narratives. By asserting their right to leisure, autonomy, and safety, the women in *Pink* challenge the spatial politics of gender. As Phadke (2005) argues, women’s access to public space is not merely about safety but about citizenship – their right to exist without justification.

4.4 Sexual Violence and the Reconfiguration of Justice

The Teacher (2022) and *Mom* (2017) deal with sexual violence and justice in highly personalised ways. In *The Teacher*, the protagonist, a physical education instructor, is drugged and raped by her students. What follows is a harrowing yet empowering narrative where she decides to keep the pregnancy and take revenge, without institutional support. Her agency is not framed as vengeance for male honour, but as an assertion of self-respect and autonomy.

Similarly, *Mom* portrays a stepmother who becomes an avenger after her daughter is sexually assaulted. These films differ from earlier rape-revenge films in Indian cinema, where male characters often led the retributive arc. Here, women reclaim the narrative space and enact justice on their terms. This shift reflects what Baxi (2014) identifies as the emergence of a new “gender justice” discourse that emphasises women’s agency over victimhood.

These portrayals are particularly significant in a post-2012 India, where the Delhi gang rape case triggered national debates on sexual violence, legal reform, and victim blaming. Films like *The Teacher* and *Mom* extend this discourse by placing female pain and resistance at the center, thereby challenging the conventional portrayal of women as passive recipients of male protection or legal redress.

4.5 The Intersection of Culture, Class, and Patriarchal Norms

Across the selected films, there is a recurrent tension between tradition and modernity, and between class-based privileges and systemic subordination. In *Thappad*, Amrita's upper-middle-class background offers her certain protections – legal recourse, education, and a support network – yet these are not sufficient to shield her from patriarchal control. In contrast, characters like the housemaid Sunita, who also faces domestic abuse, lack the institutional and emotional resources to resist.

This juxtaposition reveals the uneven terrain of gender justice. Intersectionality becomes vital in this context; as Crenshaw (1991) suggests, women experience patriarchy differently depending on their social location. Films that explore these intersections more fully, such as *GIRL*, where class and tradition shape a bride's experience of domesticity, are better equipped to reflect the complexity of female subjugation and resistance.

4.6 Emotional Labour, Motherhood, and the Feminine Ideal

Traditional Indian cinema has long glorified the sacrificial mother figure, casting her as the emotional anchor of the family. However, films like *Sara's*, *Thappad*, and *Mom* offer more layered portrayals. Sara's rejection of motherhood in favour of personal ambition challenges the essentialist idea that motherhood is the pinnacle of female achievement. Her decision not to feel guilty for choosing a career over childbearing is a critical departure from normative scripts.

In *Thappad*, Amrita's decision to raise her child alone post-divorce is not framed as heroic but as an act of necessity and principle. *Mom* subverts the "evil stepmother" trope by depicting Devki, the stepmother, as a protector and avenger, suggesting that maternal care is not a biological imperative but a political choice. These representations destabilise the naturalisation of motherhood and highlight the emotional labour women are expected to perform.

5. Linguistics and the Cultural Semantics of Patriarchy

Language in cinema extends beyond mere dialogue; it is a fundamental mechanism through which ideologies are constructed, reinforced, and contested. In Indian popular cinema, patriarchal semantics often manifest through everyday expressions that assert male authority and reinforce female subordination. Commonplace phrases such as "I am the man of the house," "You should be ashamed," or "A woman must know her limits" function as cultural codes that reflect and propagate unequal gender dynamics. These expressions operate through what Pierre Bourdieu (1991) terms "symbolic violence" – the subtle and often invisible forms of domination that occur through language and classification.

Films like *Thappad* demonstrate how language is instrumental in maintaining patriarchal boundaries. Vikram's rhetorical assertion, "What will people think?" places societal perception above personal dignity, using external judgment as a disciplinary mechanism to police Amrita's autonomy. Her eventual silence in response is not a passive act but a subversive rejection of the terms of the conversation itself. The juxtaposition of speech and silence in such scenes foregrounds the asymmetrical power embedded in who speaks, listens, and remains unheard (Chatterji, 2020).

Conversely, in *Pink*, language becomes both a weapon and a shield. The prosecutor attempts to linguistically discipline the female characters during the courtroom sequences by framing their autonomy as immoral. Euphemisms like "character" and "values" become tools of coercion, meant to elicit shame and reestablish control (Menon, 2015). However, the legal discourse is effectively subverted when the defence lawyer reclaims linguistic authority by repeatedly insisting, "No means No." This declaration becomes an iconic feminist assertion that redefines consent as absolute and non-negotiable (Sunder Rajan, 2020).

These films also explore how female characters internalise language. In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the absence of long-range dialogue underscores domestic labour's performative and repetitive nature. The protagonist's eventual outburst becomes more powerful precisely because of its contrast to the silent monotony that precedes it. Here, silence operates not as submission but as a build-up to resistance (Bhaskaran, 2021).

Furthermore, patriarchal narratives often use romantic idioms to cloak coercion – phrases like "I did it for you" or "It's for your own good" disguise control as affection. Such statements blur the lines between care and domination, making it difficult to isolate oppressive behaviour. Films that challenge these tropes emphasise honest, egalitarian dialogue, allowing women to articulate desires, set boundaries, and contest imposed roles (Ghosh, 2019).

The power of linguistic re-signification lies in its ability to disrupt normalized meanings. Statements like "I want this for myself" (*Sara's*) or "This isn't love" (*Thappad*) mark a shift from relational identity to self-definition. These declarations break the self-effacement script and challenge the female fulfilment narrative through male validation (Kumar, 2021).

In sum, cinema serves as a battleground for competing linguistic regimes. The articulation of male privilege and female agency through speech, silence, euphemism, and declaration forms a crucial dimension of gender politics on screen. By interrogating

the cultural semantics of patriarchy, these films expose how power is embedded in actions and words – and how those words can be reclaimed to forge emancipatory narratives.

6. Active and Passive Agents in Patriarchal Reproduction

Patriarchy is not upheld solely by overt male domination but also by the silent, habitual reproduction of gender roles across generations and institutions. Indian cinema vividly illustrates this dynamic, portraying characters who enforce or challenge patriarchal expectations. Importantly, resistance to patriarchy does not always take the form of open rebellion; it can also emerge through negotiation, endurance, and subtle subversion (Kandiyoti, 1988; Uberoi, 2006).

Active agents of resistance in films like *Thappad*, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, and *The Great Indian Kitchen* are primarily women who confront the deeply embedded norms dictating their behaviour. Amrita in *Thappad* breaks away from a marriage not due to physical abuse alone but because of an existential realisation that her worth is constantly diminished. Her refusal to forgive a single slap is symbolically potent – it represents a rejection of the entire architecture of male entitlement (Roy, 2021). Jaya's journey from being a victim of domestic violence to physically resisting her husband portrays a transformation from passivity to assertion, echoing broader feminist calls for self-defence and bodily autonomy (Patel, 2022).

However, alongside these protagonists are women who perpetuate the very system that subjugates them. Characters like mothers, sisters, and aunts often reinforce patriarchal norms through well-meaning but constrictive advice. In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the mother-in-law embodies this passive complicity, instructing the bride to adapt and endure, thereby normalising gendered labour as a duty rather than oppression. This illustrates Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of "patriarchal bargaining," where women internalise and perform gender roles in exchange for social acceptance or security.

Men, too, are not a monolith in their alignment with patriarchal values. In *Pink*, the defence lawyer is an example of ethical masculinity, dismantling gendered stereotypes through legal rhetoric (Banerjee, 2017). Similarly, in *The Teacher*, supportive male characters aid the protagonist's pursuit of justice, demonstrating that male privilege can be renounced in favour of solidarity. These portrayals are crucial in complicating the narrative that men are inherently oppressive; instead, they show that patriarchal systems can be resisted by all genders (Nair, 2021).

Moreover, the ambivalence in many characters reflects the societal contradictions people navigate. For instance, the male protagonist in *Sara's* story initially appears supportive of his partner's decision not to have children, but later attempts to coerce her into conforming to traditional ideals. This duplicity reveals how progressive posturing can mask conservative impulses – a phenomenon prevalent in cinema and real life (Chopra, 2022).

The complexity of agency is further amplified when resistance is expressed through everyday acts. Small gestures – refusing to cook, demanding space, questioning traditions – become political statements. These micro-resistances accumulate into larger acts of defiance, revealing that agency need not be dramatic to be transformative (John, 2014).

Ultimately, Indian cinema's depiction of active and passive agents in patriarchy demonstrates that gender inequality is a collective cultural construct. It is upheld by both men and women, challenged by both, and reproduced through rituals, language, silence, and resistance. By portraying a spectrum of responses to patriarchy, these films invite viewers to reflect on their complicity and potential for resistance, making the personal unequivocally political.

7. Motherhood and Emotional Labour

Motherhood in Indian cinema is not merely a biological function but a deeply ideological institution. Traditionally depicted as the ultimate fulfilment of womanhood, motherhood in mainstream films has often been used to exalt self-sacrifice, patience, and unconditional love – qualities that reinforce gendered expectations of emotional labour (Chakravarti, 2001; Krishnaraj, 1995). However, contemporary feminist cinema is actively redefining this construct by portraying motherhood as a site of both oppression and resistance.

In *Sara's*, the protagonist's decision to reject motherhood marks a critical intervention in this discourse. Her refusal to conform to societal expectations that equate fertility with femininity challenges the deeply entrenched idea that women achieve wholeness only through reproduction. The film problematises the coercion disguised as care, showing how even supportive partners and family members manipulate women's choices under the guise of concern. By asserting that her life and career goals are valid independent of maternal aspirations, Sara articulates a female identity rooted in autonomy rather than obligation (Srinivasan, 2020).

The Teacher presents a more complex negotiation with motherhood. The protagonist, a schoolteacher who becomes pregnant as a result of sexual violence, chooses to carry the child not out of martyrdom but as an act of defiance. Her decision is framed within a narrative of reclaiming agency, where motherhood is not imposed but chosen, and not sanctified but humanised. This reframing disrupts the dominant cinematic trope where victimhood is suppressed or exploited for emotional catharsis (Deshpande, 2019).

In *Mom*, the stepmother figure challenges another conventional binary – biological versus moral motherhood. Her pursuit of justice for her stepdaughter after sexual assault is portrayed not as a deviation from maternal duty but as an extension of it. This challenges the idea that motherhood is purely biological and posits care and commitment as defining features of maternal identity

(Mazumdar, 2018). The film also reveals how maternal love can be radicalised into a force for justice, especially when legal systems fail.

These representations foreground the emotional labour that mothers perform, often invisibly and without recognition. They show how emotional labour, when unreciprocated, becomes a burden that compounds other forms of exploitation. Simultaneously, they highlight how emotional labour can also become a resource for transformation when reoriented toward self-assertion and resistance (Gill, 2007).

What unites these films is their refusal to romanticise motherhood. They engage critically with its social construction, revealing how it can serve as a control mechanism and a space for reclaiming power. By doing so, they expand the scope of maternal subjectivity to include defiance, autonomy, and choice. This is significant in a society where women are often judged by their roles as caregivers, and where opting out of motherhood is still stigmatised (Kumar, 2021).

In conclusion, contemporary Indian cinema is gradually challenging the monolithic narrative of motherhood by presenting diverse, layered, and sometimes contradictory experiences. These films compel viewers to rethink the association of motherhood with virtue and sacrifice, offering instead a vision of maternal identity that is complex, contested, and deeply human.

8. Conclusion: Towards a Counter-Cinematic Feminist Praxis

The cinematic interrogation of male privilege is a powerful tool in the broader feminist cultural transformation project. Indian films have historically reinforced patriarchal norms, but the emergence of narratives that challenge these norms indicates a shift in both cinematic discourse and societal consciousness. Films like *Thappad*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Pink*, and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* are not isolated texts but part of a growing genre of counter-cinema that critiques the ideological apparatus of mainstream media.

These films utilise narrative structure, visual aesthetics, sound design, and character development to dismantle patriarchal assumptions and propose alternative gendered relations. They challenge the ideological status quo by foregrounding female perspectives, asserting bodily autonomy, and interrogating familial expectations. Importantly, these cinematic texts engage in what Stuart Hall (1981) calls "cultural resistance" by destabilizing hegemonic narratives from within.

Future directions for feminist cinema should focus on intersectional representation, ethical masculinity, and collaborative storytelling that includes marginalized voices. Filmmakers must consider who is represented on screen and who is behind the camera. The transformative potential of cinema lies not just in its content but in its production processes.

Thus, interrogating male privilege in Indian popular cinema is not merely an academic exercise but a political intervention. It calls on viewers, critics, and creators alike to recognise cinema as a site of struggle – a battlefield where stories are told, identities are formed, and power is contested.

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